

## Jewish Conversion to the Bahá'í faith

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The Bahá'í faith is the youngest world religion. Born in Iran in 1844 in the fold of Shī'ite Islam, it succeeded in breaking away completely from Islam during the first 160 years of its existence and crossing its boundaries of origin, forsaking the languages of its birth – Persian and Arabic – and spreading out over the whole world. By now, 2007, it boasts almost 6,000,000 adherents. All Bahá'í believers answer the call of the Bahá'í teachers to join the new religion, out of free will and conviction. Since, unlike the Christian Church, this new faith does not have organized institutions of conversion and proselytising, the fact that the members join of out of their own free will deserves to be appreciated even more, and testifies to its particular attraction. More significant is the fact that a religion that was born deep within the culture of the East spread so quickly, and seemingly so effortlessly, in the West, particularly among the Christians, taking into consideration the fact that its prophets and teachers professed Islam. Moreover, they emphasized Islam's true divine message, insisted that Muḥammad's prophecy stood on the same level as that of the previous prophets: Abraham, Moses and Jesus (a prophet according to the Qur'ān), and that the Qur'ān was a book of revelation similar (if not superior) to the Old and New Testaments.

But it was not only Christians and Muslims (mainly Shī'ites in Iran) who were attracted to the Bahá'í faith, many Jews joined it too, forsaking the ancient religion of their fathers.

The Jewish conversion to the Bahá'í faith is particularly interesting and has attracted the attention of quite a few scholars (see bibliographical note at the end). The Jews joined the faith in its country of origin, Iran. There are no reports of any significant conversions of Jews to the Bahá'í faith elsewhere in the East, except for Iraqi Jewish converts who were an appreciable percentage of the Bahá'í community of Iraq even though they were not a large number in absolute terms. This article, therefore, deals with the conversion of the Jews in Iran, where they were among the early converts to the new religion, first here and there as individuals, and from the late 1870s in massive numbers.

The Jewish conversion to the Bahá'í faith in Shī'ite Iran is an amazing phenomenon, particularly since, at first glance, it seems completely illogical. The Bahá'ís, from the very inception of their existence and already in their Bábí stage, were a persecuted group. They were regarded by the Shī'ite clergy to be apostates who forsook Islam (*murtadd*) and therefore deserving to be punished by death. The Jews, for their part, were not only persecuted, despised and degraded, but they were regarded to be ritually unclean (*najis*) according to the Shī'ite rules of ritual impurity (*najāsah*). This means that a Jew could contaminate a Muslim by touch and could contaminate a whole neighbourhood if he stepped into the street in the rain or in snow; in which case the water running from him could cause this environmental impurity. In addition, the Jews in the 19<sup>th</sup> century continued to be subjected to the physical persecution that they had suffered since the 16<sup>th</sup> century when Iran became a Shī'ite state. They constituted the lowest social class, at least

among the urban population. Some Jews lived in small provincial towns and villages but most of the Jews lived in the major urban centres: Tehrān, Hamadān, Yazd, Isfahān' Shīrāz, Mashhad (Meshed), Qazvīn, Bushehr (Bushīr), Kāshān and Kirmanshāh. Their condition was best described by Lord Curzon (*Persia and the Persian Question*, London, 1892, 2:510-511):

"Usually compelled to live apart in a ghetto, or separate quarter of the towns, they have from time immemorial suffered from disabilities of occupation, dress, and habits which have marked them out as social pariahs from their fellow creatures. The majority of Jews in Persia are engaged in trade, in jewelry, in wine and opium manufacture, as musicians, dancers, scavengers, peddlers, and in other professions to which is attached no great respect. They rarely attain to a leading mercantile position. In Isfahan where there are said to be 3,700, and where they occupy a relatively better status than elsewhere in Persia, they are not permitted to wear the *kolah* or Persian head-dress, to have shops in the bazaar, to build the walls of their houses as high as a Moslem neighbour's, or to ride in the streets. In Teheran and Kashan they are also to be found in large numbers and enjoying a fair position. In Shiraz they are very badly off. At Bushire they are prosperous and free from persecution. As soon, however, as any outburst of bigotry takes place in Persia and elsewhere the Jews are apt to be the first victims."

The most significant event in these seasonal pogroms against the Jews was the forced conversion to Islam of what remained of the Jewish community of Mashhad (Meshed) in 1839, following the ransacking of the Jewish quarter and the massacre of the Jews by the incited Muslim mob (see e.g. M. Streck, "Meshhed" in *EI*<sup>1</sup>). These forcibly converted Jews were not fully accepted into the Muslim Iranian society, and their peculiar position as newly converted was indicated by the appellation: "*Jadīd al-Islām*" ("neophyte to Islam"). The Mashhad-converted Jews behaved like the Marranos in Spain in the 15-16<sup>th</sup> centuries, displaying their Islam outwardly and keeping as much as they could of their Judaism in secret including making every possible effort to marry among themselves alone. Side by side with forced conversion to Islam there was also conversion out of choice by some individual Jews seeking to free themselves from their wretched conditions and move to the privileged Muslim class. It is therefore an interesting question why so many Jews adopted the Bahá'í faith, a choice which seems like "out of the frying pan into the fire".

The Bábí-Bahá'í faith was born in Iran amid the mounting Messianic expectations which engulfed the Shī'ah as a whole when the year AH1260 (1844) drew near. This date signified one thousand years after the "disappearance" of the 12<sup>th</sup> Imām, who the Shī'ah believes to be the Hidden Mahdī, the expected Messiah, whose advent, it is believed, will usher in a new age for Islam in particular and for the whole world as a whole. Once he comes, the Mahdī will finally establish the rule of the House of the Prophet, namely the Shī'ite version of Islam, righteousness and justice, instead of the prevailing evil and tyranny.

The expectations of the appearance of the Mahdī also assumed a practical form. In 1844, some Shī'ite disciples of the Shaykhī movement, that had

developed among its other teachings a particular veneration of the Imāms, initiated a search for the hidden Mahdī, who according to their calculations should have already appeared, or for the holy person who could have been in contact with him. It was exactly at that moment in time that ‘Alī Muḥammad from the city of Shīrāz (hence his appellation: Shīrāzī) announced himself to be the Promised One and assumed the title of “Bāb,” that is to say “Gate.” This title was ambiguous enough to be interpreted as either the Gate to the Hidden Imām-Mahdī or the returned Mahdī himself. Soon a Bābī community was created, comprising members who came from various parts of Iran and from all classes of the Iranian society, including some influential Shī‘ite clergymen.

In the beginning, the teachings of the Báb were regarded as attempts to reform Islam. However, it soon became clear that his teachings amounted to no less than the creation of a new religion claiming to supersede Islam. His most important idea in this regard was that Muḥammad and the Qur’ān belonged to a prophetic cycle that had come to an end with his own appearance and that the Islamic laws and other teachings of the Qur’ān had been replaced by his own laws and teachings as defined in his holy book, the Bayān. One of his main reforms stressed the complete equality of the sexes, which meant that women were full partners in the new society that he envisaged. In 1848 the Báb’s followers announced that his teachings constituted a new religion which was completely independent of Islam, although it did not negate the initial holiness of the Qur’ān and the prophethood of Muḥammad.

The spread of the new religion, which was saturated with messianic enthusiasm, and in a few places attracted violence, alarmed the Iranian government as well as the Shī‘ite establishment. They regarded the Báb as some kind of a revolutionary and his close disciples who included a woman – the poetess Fātīmeh nicknamed Qurrat al-‘Ayn – as his dangerous agents, threatening the fragile structure of the Qajār monarchy and disturbing the flimsy equilibrium of the Iranian society. The Shah decided to execute the Báb, and curtail the activity of his followers by systematic persecution. The Báb was executed by a firing squad on July 9, 1850 in Tabrīz and his death was followed by a severe campaign of persecution against his adherents. This persecution intensified following a Bābī attempt on the Shah’s life in 1852. All the remaining original followers of the Báb including Qurrat al-‘Ayn were tortured and killed.

The death of the Báb, the pogroms which had been initiated and carried out by the state and the mob incited by the Shī‘ite clergy, the torture and the executions, decimated the Bābī movement that had lost its prophet and his “apostles.”

The rescue of the Bābī movement came from one of the Báb’s supporters – Mīrzā Ḥusayn ‘Alī Nūrī (1817-1892) who, in spite of the fact that he had never met the Báb, succeeded in rallying around himself the remnants of the movement and establishing himself as its true leader. In time he named himself Bahá’u’lláh, that is to say: The Splendour and Glory of God. However, it was only in 1863 that he resolved to announce to a small group of followers in Baghdad (to which he had been exiled ten years earlier), his claim to be an

independent prophet, the Manifestation of God, and the Promised One of all religions. From Baghdad he was again exiled (this time by the Ottoman government) first to Istanbul, then to Edirne (Adrianopole) and finally to Acre (‘Akko, ‘Akkā) where he was confined to a cell in the citadel in 1868. Two years later he was released and moved to live in several places in Acre and its environs and finally settled in the estate of Bahji where he lived for some 16 years until he passed away in 1892. In Edirne, already in 1866, Bahá’u’lláh had made his claim public and within a short period almost the whole of the Bábí community accepted his leadership; and during the 24 years of his “‘Akkā period” he wrote his most important works including *The Most Holy Book (al-Kitāb al-Aqdas)* which he composed in ‘Akkā in about 1873. During those years, he completed the development of his religious system which continued, and fundamentally reformed, the system of the Báb. He based his new religion on the model of three unities: The unity of God, the unity of religion and the unity of the human race. This means that God can only be one, that all the great religions and all the prophets lead to the same sublime truth and that all human beings are equal, and that this equality is final, complete, and undivided. It rejects any kind of discrimination on the basis of sex, ethnicity, colour or anything else, since all humans are “the leaves of one branch and the fruits of one tree.” He envisaged a new world order according to which the whole world is one state, free of wars and devoid of weapons, living in eternal peace (“the Most Great Peace”). He forbade the Bahá’ís to carry weapons of any kind, let alone use them. He called on the rulers of the world to agree on one common language of communication and to dedicate all their efforts to achieve peace and human unity, which he regarded essential for the achievement of his “divine plan” for the new world order. This religion based on love, peace, equality and justice, which looked revolutionary for Iran at the time, and represented apostasy to Islam at large, appeared to many in the East and the West as the perfect fulfillment of the messianic promises of the Prophets of Israel and of Jesus. Bahá’u’lláh emphasized his messianic role to Jews, Christians and Muslims as well as to Budhists and Zoroastrians, announcing that he was the promised Saviour whose advent they had all been anticipating. This claim was particularly effective in the case of Jews, Christians and Shī‘ite Muslims – all of whom were at that time in one state or another of messianic expectation – and attracted many adherents especially from Shī‘ite and Jewish circles. The many Shī‘ite followers were convinced that Bahá’u’lláh was either the Mahdī or *Husayn redivivus* – the returned third Imām Ḥusayn, whose revival the Shī‘ah anticipated as one of the important signs for the advent of the *Qā’im*, the Mahdī (C. Buck, “The eschatology of globalization: the multiple-messianship of Bahá’ulláh revisited” in M. Sharon (ed.), *Studies in Modern Religions and Religious Movement. Leiden* 2004:146f, 149-156). The Messianic claims of Bahá’u’lláh were further sustained, developed and disseminated by his heirs – his son ‘Abbás Effendi (‘Abdu’l-Bahá ‘Abbás, 1844-1921) and the latter’s grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897-1957). This messianic claim, in the Christian case was very effective, particularly in the West, since Bahá’u’lláh affirmed that he was the “Spirit of Truth” and the “Comforter” (John, 14:16-17), and even more, that he was the “Father”

Himself. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Christians who converted to the Bahá'í faith were sure that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was "the Son." Against this background, and with the prevailing Adventist expectations and Adventist movements active particularly in America (and the German Templers in Germany and the Holy Land), the attraction of Christians to the new faith is understandable. They were assured that their long wait for the advent of the Day of the Lord had ended with the reappearance of both Father and Son and the inauguration of the Millennium leading to the final bliss of the Most Great Peace.

The Messianic message of the Bahá'í Faith was, no doubt, one of the factors that attracted the Jews of Iran to the new religion. From ancient times, messianic expectations had flared up from time to time among the Jews in Iran. The Biblical figure of Cyrus, the Persian emperor who had urged the Jewish exiles to leave Babylon, return to the land of their fathers and re-establish their national independence and state, and build the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem under his protection was very much alive in the hearts of the Jews of Iran. They cherished the hope for the appearance, once again, of a new Cyrus who like the Cyrus of old, whom the Prophet Isaiah (45:1) called the Lord's anointed, or The Messiah of the Lord, would save them from the degrading, humiliating life of fear and deprivation, of persecution and poverty imposed on them by the Shī'ite Muslims of Iran. It is very possible that even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century residues of the Messianic hopes kindled by the false-messiah Shabbatai Zvi (1626-1676), who had influenced Iranian Jewry in the Safavid period, were still alive under the surface.

Bahá'u'lláh, however, was different kind of Messiah. He was Persian, "home made", who could well be a new Cyrus. There was even more than a hint of that in his claim to be the direct descendant of the last Sasanian King of Persia, Yazdgird III, who had lost his Kingdom to the Arab Muslims. He also asserted to the Zoroastrians that he was the expected King-Messiah Shāh Bahrām (Buck, *loc. cit.*).

The Jews in Iran were among the first to convert to the Bahá'í faith, already in the seventies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Hamadān the Jewish converts were particularly numerous, and it is estimated that at least one quarter of the Jewish community in the city adopted the new religion. In Gulpayegān, where there was a particularly educated Jewish community, about 75% of the Jews became Bahá'ís. Similar processes of conversion, though not in such proportions, also occurred in other major cities of Iran such as Kashān, Tehrān, Kirmanshāh, Yazd, and Shīrāz. The only major town where the Jews did not adopt the Bahá'í faith was Iṣfahān because of the particular fanaticism of the Shī'ah clergy and population, and the relentless persecution of the Bahá'ís in this city.

Walter Fischel, one of the first scholars to study the conversion of the Jews to the Bahá'í faith, regarded Messianic expectations as the main reason for this conversion. In all the studies and reports describing the Jewish attraction to the Bahá'í faith we find, more or less, the same reasons for this strange phenomenon in which Jews willingly exchanged one status of persecution with another. These reasons can be summed up as follows.

- 1) The Jews had been suppressed by the Muslims and labeled by them as *najis* – ritually defiling, filthy - for centuries, and in particular since Iran became a Shī'ite state. Suddenly they found themselves being treated by the Bahá'ís (who had been Muslims) as equal human beings, and even sought for as friends. They could share the once Muslim community life without being degraded, and no longer had to attach the special badge to their clothes, publicly displaying their Jewishness.
- 2) The revolutionary, liberal ideas of the new religion were particularly attractive. The equality of all humans, the abolition of all signs of discrimination, religious, social or racial, the liberation of women, the rejection of all forms of violence, the striving for peace and other similar ideas were, for the Jews of Iran, as attractive as the ideas of the French Revolution were for the Jews of Europe (Fischel 1934; Netzer 2007:249).
- 3) The idea of the oneness of religion was understood by them as meaning that becoming a Bahá'í did not involve forsaking one's own religion. It was believed that the Bahá'í faith was a movement professing attractive ideas aiming at reforming society and morals, and that one could be Jewish and Bahá'í at the same time. This is what actually happened. Unlike the Jews who had converted to Islam and who were shunned by their family and the Jewish community at large, Jews who adopted the Bahá'í faith remained an integral part of their families and community. Most of them, in the first generation at least, continued observing the Jewish holidays, many went to the synagogue as usual on Sabbath, they were called to join a *minyan* (the quorum of ten men needed to perform public prayer), fasted on Yom Kippur, and some were even elected heads of the Jewish community.
- 4) The humanistic and liberal ideas of the Bahá'í faith seemed to be compatible with the words of the prophets of Israel in the Bible, to whom Bahá'u'lláh showed respect and whom he quoted as proof for the divine source of his own message. He acknowledged the greatness of Moses and the Torah, which he held valid and equal to the other Holy books of the world. He and his propagandists made an effort, when approaching Jews, to indulge in interpretations of Biblical prophetic texts in order to prove that his advent had been foreseen by the previous prophets. In many cases the Bahá'í propagandists knew the Biblical texts better than their Jewish listeners did. One of the most successful Bahá'í propagandists in this regard was Abū al-Fadl Gulpayegānī, the erudite Bahá'í scholar, who, using these methods, was very active and successful in converting Jews in Hamadān.
- 5) As already hinted, the poor condition of Judaism in Iran played a no less important part in the success of the Bahá'í propaganda among the Jews. For centuries, the Iranian Jews were virtually isolated from the rest of world Jewry. They were cut away from all the major centres of Jewish learning and developed nothing of their own. There was not even one Yeshiva anywhere, and consequently no proper Jewish religious leadership. The language, Persian, which the Jews spoke, was

also a great hindrance since it cut them off completely from their nearest Arabic speaking Jewish neighbours. In this situation, the so-called Jewish rabbis in Iran that assumed the Muslim title of "mulla" were ignorant; they could hardly read Hebrew, and barely knew the basics of a very few Jewish laws. Jewish travelers who visited some of the Jewish communities tell amazing stories about the extent of the ignorance of the Jewish *mullas* and their flock. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Bahá'í emissaries to the Jews were far more knowledgeable than those "rabbis" who in many cases were themselves convinced to join the new religion. The younger generation, which had no spiritual leaders to look up to, drifted away from traditional Jewish life looking for something satisfying to fill their free time. There was nothing open to them outside the Jewish community since the Muslim society was closed to them if they did not choose to convert. The Bahá'í lecturers and instructors who came to the major towns such as Hamadān, Tehrān and Kashān, with their universal message of equality and fraternity, directed their activity particularly to the Jews, quoting the Bible and interpreting its messianic messages in an appealing and satisfying manner. For the first time, the Jews, including some of the "rabbis", felt that there was a way to escape the confines of their community and mingle with a section of the general Iranian society, which seemed safe. Joining the Bahá'í faith, as indicated above, was not regarded as forsaking the religion of the ancestors. In time, of course, conversion to the new religion overcame the attachment to Judaism, and many Jewish converts became deeply involved in propagating the Bahá'í cause making a very valuable contribution to the spreading of the Bahá'í teachings among the Jews.

- 6) The attitude of the Bahá'í leaders to Judaism also impressed many Jews. In 1891, Bahá'u'lláh wrote directly to Baron Rothschild, announcing to him the imminent return of the Jews to the Land of Israel. This idea remained constant in the messages to the Jews both in Iran and the United States that were delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during his visit there in 1912. In a letter, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote to the Jews in Iran in 1897, he did not leave any room for ambiguity about the messianic aspects which placed the Bahá'í faith in the heart of Judaism. This intimate relation between the two religions was emphasized even more by the fact that all the most important Bahá'í holy sites were located in the Land of Israel. (Faü 2004:267)

Although this is the general picture based on the available, mainly Jewish, sources, it is also clear from these sources that there were also negative reactions from Jewish educational institutions that began intensive activity in Iran in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From 1875, the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* began its activity in Iran, and in 1880 opened the first schools in Tehrān and Iṣfahān, and the Sephardic New York organization *Otzar ha-Torah*, or in Persian *Ganj-i-Dānesh* (The Treasure of Knowledge), also opened schools for the Jews. Although the French orientated *Alliance* schools were not particularly interested in traditional Jewish education,

nevertheless they, together with *Otzar ha-Torah* provided a higher level of education, and prepared the next generation of Jewish Iranian intellectuals with a better knowledge of Hebrew, and access to the Jewish sources. In the long run this led to a lowering of interest in conversion to the Bahá'í faith, towards the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but not to abolishing it. There were many cases of Jews who received a superior education in the Jewish schools but whose education led them straight to the liberal ideas of the Bahá'í faith as it happened for instance with Eliah Sābet a son of a rabbi from Iṣfahān. Bahá'í children were also sent to these Jewish schools, in the same way that Jews went to the Bahá'í schools, which, as we shall see, were established at about the same period. This education was naturally very beneficial and it was available also to the poorer Jews of the ghetto. On the one hand it led to the second wave of conversion to the new faith between 1880 and 1898, but on the other it opened up great opportunities for the Bahá'ís and the Jews after the fall of the Qajārs and the establishment of the Pahlavī monarchy, and enabled the Jews and the Bahá'ís to enter into the highest governmental and economic posts in the country (Faü 2004:270).

From 1865, the emissaries of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* had begun sending their reports about the Jews in Iran, particularly Hamadān, to the headquarters of the organization in Paris. These reports supplied detailed information about the abysmal conditions of the Jews there, and helped, from time to time, in mobilizing influential Jewish leaders in the West, such as Sir Moses Montefiore, to use their influence with the French and British governments to intervene with the Iranian government and ease the pogroms or get some Persian Governmental protection for the Jewish quarters in some of the main towns.

From these reports it is clear that the situation of the Jews in Hamadān was particularly bad. Persecutions, pogroms, and forced conversion to Islam occurred repeatedly during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Individual Jews were murdered and Jewish shops and homes were looted by the mob, incited on a regular basis by the Shī'ite religious leaders, many of whom were personally involved in murdering Jews. This state of affairs continued until almost the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Netzer 2007:234-240). Even as late as 1911, long after the constitutional revolution of 1906, severe persecution of Jews in Hamadān continued. Bahá'ís in Hamadān lived in or near the Jewish neighbourhoods, and sometimes one suffered because of the persecution of the other. However, much sympathy was shown by the Jews to their Bahá'í neighbours, and common danger brought them together.

Whatever the reason, the Jews of Hamadān, as mentioned above, were the first to accept the Bahá'í faith. There is a report that the first conversion of some Jewish individuals in Hamadān occurred already in 1852 (the year of the severe persecutions of Bábís). The poetess Qurrat al-·Ayn is said to have been the initiator of the conversion process in Hamadān following her visit to the city around 1847 . When still in Iraq she met a Jewish physician called Ḥakīm Masiḥ who later became a court physician to Muḥammad Shāh (died 1848). At this meeting, Masiḥ was

very impressed by the eloquence of Qurrat al-‘Ayn and also by the liberal teachings of the Báb as presented by her. Apparently he converted to the Bábí faith in about 1860 after meeting an imprisoned Bábí named Mullā Ṣādiq-i-Muqaddas (Ismu’llah al-Asdaq), a survivor of the great battle of Shaykh Ṭabarsī. Thus he gained the place of the first Jew in the world to adopt the new faith. When the news reached Bahá'u'lláh he sent him a special epistle (in the Bahá’í language: “a Tablet was revealed by the Exalted Pen in honour of Ḥakím Masíḥ.” *The Bahá’í World*, 15, 1976:430). In spite of the fact that Ḥakím Masíḥ was an important personality, being the Shāh’s Physician, his influence on the Jewish community was negligible. Ḥakím Masíḥ was the grand father of Dr. Luṭfu'lláh Ḥakím (1888-1968) a member of the first Universal House of Justice. (*Ibid*, 430-434; H. Balyuzi, *Báb*, Oxford 1975:165n.; *idem*, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Oxford, 1974:78n.) In spite of the conversions made so early, we still have to wait for the years 1877-1880 to witness the first wave of Jewish conversion *en masse* to the Bahá’í faith in Hamadān and elsewhere. As to the activity of Qurrat al-‘Ayn in Hamadān, it is reported that she conducted talks with two Jewish rabbis Mullā Iliyāhū (Eliyāhū) and Mullā Lāhizār (El-azār) “which led to attracting members of the Jewish Faith to the Bábí fold. (Balyuzi, *Báb*, 165) If this piece of information is true, then the Jews in this case were extremely brave to join a movement that was deemed to be in open rebellion against the Shāh.

The appearance of a woman in Hamadān displaying queenly qualities, clever, erudite and eloquent, evoked among the Jews in the city memories closely connected with another woman whose tomb was a centre of veneration there. This was Queen Esther – the Jewish-Persian Empress who, together with her uncle Mordechai (whose tomb next to hers is equally venerated), saved the Jews of her time from extermination, using a combination of her beauty and wisdom (Book of Esther 9:24-32). This Biblical story of the Book of Esther has always been a source of pride, hope and happiness for the Jews. For the Jews in Hamadān it had an added value. The tombs of the two Jewish-Persian heroes, sites of pilgrimage for Jews and non-Jews, assured them of God’s commitment to save his people. For a while, they could perceive Qurrat al-‘Ayn as the new Esther with her message of the imminent redemption offered by the new faith. Her given name was Fātimih (Fātimah), but she was also known by the epithet of Zarrīn Tāj (the Golden Crown) a name which could not have been missed by those who attributed to her regal qualities.

The success of the Bahá’í propagandists in Hamadān was overwhelming. In 1878 ‘Alī Muḥammad b. Aṣdaq, a Baha’í missionary came from Khurāsān to Hamadān in order to convert Jews. The first Jew to convert in that year was a physician Ḥakím Āqā Jān, who left his medical practice to become a full time propagandist for his new religion, and succeeded in converting many more Jews in Hamadān. Having some access to the Jewish scriptures as well as to the New Testament and the Qur’ān he used these sources to bring proofs about the truth of the Bahá’í faith, and persuade others, both Jews and non-Jews to join it. Ḥakím Āqā Jān was very successful. He convinced Ḥakím Rahīm Ḥāfiẓ as-Sihhih, his uncle, to

adopt the Bahá'í faith and from then on the conversion on a family basis began. He attracted forty close members of his family and friends, including his wife Tutí Khānum, his five sisters with their husbands, and then his brother Elie as well as his own father who was a prominent rabbi in the city. (Faü 2004:266; Netzer 2007:241 and notes). Ḥakīm Āqā continued to visit the synagogue for Shabbat prayers announcing there and then that the advent of Bhá'u'lláh was "The Day of the Lord." (Faü, *loc. cit.*)

At about the same time, a series of debates took place that were later recorded and published in a book by the name of *Gulshān-i-Haqā'iq* (Rose Garden of Truths), one of the most important books of Bahá'í polemics. The author was Hājj Mahdī Arjomand of Hamadān, a nephew of Ḥakim Āqā Jān. The book was directed mainly to Christians and Muslims. It applied the methods that had already developed in Bahá'í propaganda, with extensive use of Biblical and Qur'ānic quotations in order to prove the truths of the Bahá'í faith. The book also contained certain parts that were directed to the Jews of Iran. However, the methods of propaganda displayed to them were not much different from the methods used by any of the Christian missionaries, who had been quite active among the Jews in Iran (but unlike the Bahá'ís, with a very limited success). To the Jews, the *Gulshān-i-Haqā'iq* also presented the idea that the appearance of Bhá'u'lláh had already been foreseen and reported by the prophets of Israel, and therefore when he announced that he was the one whose advent had been prophesized in both the Old and the New Testaments his claim was regarded to have a solid basis. Arjomand, however, did not refrain from attacking Jews and Christians when he thought that they opposed him, but was very lenient and very accommodating when it came to Muslims.

As pointed out, it was among the Jews of Hamadān that the Bahá'í efforts were most successful. A Jewish source from 1884 (the traveler Ephraim Neumark), reports that not only about quarter of the Hamdāni Jews converted to the Bahá'í faith, but that among the converts were very distinguished members of the Jewish community like Meir ben Hājjī El-azār (probably the son of Lalīzār who had met Qurrat al-‘Ayn), Ḥakīm Avraham, Mullā Rabbi Yehazqel, Mullā Yehūdā ben Mullā Ḥakīm, and Ḥakīm Mūsā (E. Neumark, *Massa‘ot be-Eretz ha-Qedem, Jerusalem*, 1947:81. For the whole description see pp.72-98). The same phenomenon can be perceived in other major towns where Jews were subsequently attracted to the Bahá'í faith. According to reports of the Jewish elders in Kāshān, half of the Bahá'ís in the city were of Jewish origin among them several notable families such as: Amanāt, Berjis, Mithāqiyān, Mottahedeh, Reyhānī, Yusefyān and others (Netzer 2007:244 n.35). The conversion of most of the Jewish community in Gulpayegān, where there was a large concentration of Jewish physicians, should not seem unusual, for the more the Jews were educated, the more they were attracted to the Bahá'í teachings. The Bahá'í propagandists themselves were overall, highly educated (Abū al-Fadl Gulpayegānī was an outstanding example), and of

no less importance was the fact that many of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, as presented by them, had already been available in print.

To answer the need of providing good education to children a network of Bahá'í schools developed. In Hamadan and Kashan where most of the Jewish Baha'is lived, it was largely at the instigation and through the contributions of the Jewish Baha'is that these schools were established and they were open to Jewish children as well. The language of instruction was Persian. The curriculum included sciences and foreign languages, and the schools introduced the most modern pedagogical methods, displaying a real revolution in the educational system. Two schools were opened in Hamadān: *Ta'íd* for boys and *Mohibbat* for girls; and two in Kashan, the Vahdat-e Bashar schools for boys and girls. These schools were opened parallel to the establishment of the schools of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* and achieved a great success. By 1920 there were about 60 such Bahá'í schools all over the country, including Tehrān, Hamadan and Kāshān, in which Jewish and Bahá'í children learnt together. These schools provided excellent education, and at the same time were, no doubt, additional conduits for Jewish conversion (Faü 2004:269).

In 1899, under the influence of a Jewish convert from Hamadān, Hājjī Yahuda the son of a Jewish rabbi from Rasht adopted the new religion, believing that Bahá'ulláh was the promised messiah, an idea he transmitted to his father's adherents. In this way the Bahá'í faith was introduced to a northern Jewish community in Iran. The Alliance Israelite reported 30 Jews in Rasht in 1904 and it is likely that the majority of these were Baha'i converts. This is also due to the fact that three or four Baha'i Jewish families moved from Hamadān to Rasht following which a few more Jews there were converted

In Mashhad, where the Jews had been forced to convert to Islam, there were some early Baha'i conversions in about 1873. One of the most active of these was Mīrzā 'Azīz'ullāh, the son of a rabbi, who converted in 1876, thus escaping his status of "neophyte to Islam" by adopting the new faith and announcing that Bahá'u'lláh was the "Guide of the People of Israel." In other words, that the adoption of the Bahá'í faith amounted the deliverance of the Jews from the Islamic religion forced on them.

To the reasons already mentioned about the Jewish attraction to the Bahá'í faith one should add the fact that, when the mass Jewish conversion to the new faith took place, Bahá'u'lláh was still alive conducting his activities, and sending his messages and emissaries from the Holy Land. His Messianic figure was real and he spoke openly from the land of the Prophets of Israel about the Return to Zion, and about the renewal of the ancient Jewish independence. The Jews no doubt regarded him as the new Cyrus and as the Jewish Messiah at the same time. His message seemed to have been speaking clearly in those terms. These were solid arguments, which the new Jewish converts could easily communicate to their co-religionists. Thus the conversion of the Jews brought not only new adherents to the faith but also excellent propagandists to its cause who could act within their Jewish communities

without hindrance. It is not surprising that so many of the Iranian Jewish families have Bahá'í relatives.

The conversion to the Bahá'í religion slowed down from the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and ceased almost completely in its third decade. There are a few reasons for this development. The introduction to Iran of the Zionist activity and the rise to power of Rezā Shāh Pahlevi (1925). Both these developments were connected with the flourishing of secular national ideas. The Zionist movement excited the youth with its modern national revival and the rise of Rezā Shāh replaced the fanatic religious Shī'ah ideology and power, which had been predominant in Iran during the Qajār period, with a royal policy aiming at the regeneration of the ancient Iranian national identity. The Jewish youth and intellectuals had, as result, two new objectives to which they were attracted; two goals both of which were national and secular. The first one involved Jewish pride and true hope for Jewish redemption by the Jewish people itself. For the Jews of Iran it meant the end of their long isolation from the rest of the Jewish world. The second meant that the Jews could, for the first time, take part in an all-Iranian national effort unhindered by the traditional status of the outcast to which the Shī'ah had subjected them.

The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, and the mass migration of the Iranian Jews to it closed completely the Bahá'í chapter in the modern history of Iranian Jewry.

#### Bibliographical note:

The first serious treatment of the conversion of the Jews in Iran to the Bahá'í faith was done by Walter Fischel when he published his first study on the subject in 1934 and then again in 1937, 1949 and 1950. W. Fischel, 1934. "The Baha'i movement and Persian Jewry." *The Jewish Review*, II, 7, Dec. 1933/March 1934; idem, 1937. "Bei den Baha'i-Juden in Iran." *Jüdische Rundschau*, Nr. 24/25; idem 1949. "The Baha'i movement and Persian Jewry." *American Jewish Yearbook*, 1947-48, New York (p. 54); idem, 1950. "Jews in Persia 1795-1940." *Jewish Social Studies*, 12:119-160. A similar study with an attempt to reach some statistical evaluation about the scope of the Jewish conversion to the new religion compared with the conversion to Christianity and Islam, in comparison to the situation of the Jews in Iran in the Qajār period, was produced by Jean François Faü 2004. "Juifs et Baha'is en Iran 1844-1920." *Revue des Études Juives (REJ)* 163: 257-271. He gives details about the conversion of individual Jews and particularly of the mass conversions in Hamadān and elsewhere. In reviewing the reasons for this conversion he emphasizes the Messianic aspect of the Bahá'í message as it was clearly emphasized by in a letter that 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote to the Jews in Iran in 1897 (pp.266-270) Thirty years earlier, a similar view in a more concise form was offered by Hayyim J. Cohen 1973. *The Jews of the Middle East 1860-1972*. Jerusalem, pp. 164-166. By far the most extensive and most recent study of the subject was done by Amnon Netzer 2007. "Conversion of the Iranian Jews to the Bahá'í faith: early period." *Irano-Judaica* 6:232-263. Jerusalem. In this study, Professor Netzer made use of all the available sources in Persian and in Hebrew and quoted them extensively. He concentrated mainly on the conversion of Jews in Hamadān but referred also

to other places as well: Tehrān, Kashān, Gulpaegān, Kermanshāh and elsewhere. He appended his study with a very rich and valuable bibliographical list, which in itself is essential as a guide to further studies. At about the same time, Mehrdad Amanat, 2006, wrote a PhD thesis for the University of California Los Angeles entitled: *Negotiating Identities, Iranian Jews, Muslims and Bahá'ís*, in which the author, who comes from a Bahá'í-Jewish family, explains among other things "why a persecuted minority would choose to join a new religion that was subject to even harsher persecution, rather than seek the relative security of conversion to Islam" (p.viii). One of his answers (in addition to all the other reasons discussed in the article above) is that Bahá'í conversion removed, to a large extent, old cultural barriers and allowed greater assimilation. Taking into consideration Amanat's personal experience there is a special added value to his judgment in his thesis (about to appear in a book form) which revolves around the autobiography of Rayhān Rayhānī, himself a convert, whose Kāshānī, influential Jewish family was among the first converts to the Bahá'í faith. Mūsā Amanāt, Mehrdad's father and one of the most prominent Jewish Bahá'ís in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, accumulated a large amount of material on the Jewish Baha'is of Iran. He published two short studies entitled "*Ahībā-ye-kalīmī tabār-i-Kāshān – ta·rīkhche-·i-kutāh az jāmi·e-·i-kuhen ve qadīmī ke bi·amr-i-jadīd imān āvurd.*" (A historical note about the conversion of the Jews in Kāshān to the new faith, the cases of the families of Cohen and Qadīmī). *Payām-i-Bahā’ī* Nos. 236/237, July-August 1999:49-53; 66-70; "Kayfiyat-i Iqbal-i Yahúdiyán-i Hamadán bih Diyánat-i Bahá'í", *Payām-i Bahá’ī*, no. 210, May 1997, pp. 19-24; no. 215, Oct. 1997, pp. 22-24; no. 216, Nov. 1997, pp. 28-32; no. 217, Dec. 1997, pp. 24-28.

Habību'llāh Sābetī himself a member of a family of Jewish converts, contributed, a small book (*Wārithān-i-Kalīm, Tā·rīkh-i-Hayāt-u-Khadamāt-i-Ahībbā·-i-Kalīmī-ye-Hamadān*. Australia 2004) to the study of the conversion of the Jews in Hamadān. The book contains firsthand details about the circumstances and the scope of the conversion of the Hamadāni Jews to the Bahá'í faith, and their services to it. Detailed, on-the-spot reports about the condition of the Jews in the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were sent by the representatives of the *Alliance* and published in the *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle* (BAIU) 1911:68ff. For more material, consult Netzer's bibliography, *op.cit.* pp. 261-263.

Also worth mentioning are:

Habib Levi, *Taríkh-i Yahúd-i Iran*, 3 vols., [Tehran]: Berukhim, 1954-1960 – contains a lot of important information on the subject. Abdu'l-Hamid Ishraq-Khavari, *Taríkh-i Amri-yi Hamadan* (ed. Vahid Rafati), Hofheim: Bahá'í-Verlag, 2004 Susan Stiles (Maneck), "The Conversion of Religious Minorities to the Bahá'í Faith in Iran: Some Preliminary Observations", unpublished paper presented to Los Angeles Bahá'í History Conference, 5-7 August 1983

There are also a paper by Mehrdad Amanat in the book *The Baha'is of Iran* (ed. Brookshaw and Fazel) and I believe the book of his thesis is now out although I have not seen it.